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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000010

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SUBJECT: OIC CULTURAL DG ARGUES FOR PROHIBITING RELIGIOUS
DEFAMATION

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Director General (DG) of the Cultural and Social Affairs Department of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) explained OIC positions on religious intolerance to DRL/MLGA Foreign Affairs Officer. After describing efforts to combat Islamic extremism at the cultural level, the DG presented the OIC's case for legal prohibitions against the "defamation of religion," arguing that such prohibitions have a place within multilateral resolutions on human rights. END SUMMARY.

Combating Extremism:
The Silent Majority is Not Being Heard

¶2. (C) DRL/MLGA Foreign Affairs Officer and PolEconOff met on December 8 with Ambassador Hemayet Uddin, Director General of the OIC's Cultural and Social Affairs Department, and Boudjelal T. Azzout of the OIC's Legal Affairs Department. Ambassador Uddin began the discussion by explaining that "culture is what we are," but during colonialism, much of the great culture of Islam was lost and poverty took over. In recent years, he said, there has been an increase in the targeting and profiling of Muslims because of actions taken by the extremist minority. According to Ambassador Uddin, the silent majority of non-extremist Muslims is not being heard and the OIC is taking steps to change this by clearly defining what is Islam and promoting the need for tolerance. OIC activities include developing a Youth Forum, motivating madrasas to discuss tolerance and true Islamic values, and promoting inter-religious dialogue.

OIC's Increased Focus on Human Rights

¶3. (C) Azzout of the OIC Legal Affairs Department said that in recent years, the OIC has become increasingly active on issues related to human rights. Azzout reported that in 2005 the heads of member states met to develop a 10-year program for the promotion and protection of human rights and announced their intent to develop an independent body to promote human rights and an Islamic Charter on Human Rights. In 2006, the OIC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize a workshop to draft the Charter for Human Rights in Islam.

Religious Tolerance versus Defamation of Religion

¶4. (C) Director General Uddin explained that the OIC sees negative portrayals of Islam leading to an increased divide

between Muslims and non-Muslims and to increased extremism. However, the OIC is not content to focus only on efforts to promote dialogue and understanding, but rather advocates for the criminalization of expression that incites hostility and discrimination by developing the concept of "defamation of religion" in the UN system. The DG explained defamation within the context of Islamophobia, which he described as a top OIC concern, but claimed that the issue concerned all religions. He argued that increasingly heterogeneous populations mean that religious conflicts are now a "clash of people" more than they are a clash of civilizations, and that prohibitions against defamation are necessary to prevent an "unbridled, destructive course" towards increasing civil violence.

¶15. (C) The DG was reluctant to specify precisely what would constitute defamation of religion. He cited the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed as an example that would qualify, but said that religious criticism per se would not automatically be considered defamatory. When asked about hypothetical prohibitions against language that "incites" versus language that "insults," the DG dismissed the distinction as a technicality.

¶16. (C) When presented with the U.S. government's concern that the concept of prohibiting defamation violates freedom of expression, the DG responded that the OIC supports this freedom but not its abuse. Azzout explained that the OIC sees freedom from Islamophobia as an example of a "third-generation" human right which should not be violated, even via the exercise of a "first-generation" right such as freedom of expression. The DG said that a compromise needs to be reached between different understandings of these rights. He closed by recognizing the importance of promoting

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tolerance through dialogue, but said he remains committed to advocating for legal prohibitions against defamation.

Comment

¶17. (C) DRL/MLGA COMMENT: While the U.S. discourages actions that are offensive to particular religious traditions, the defamation of religion concept violates freedom of religion and freedom of expression by limiting the ability of individuals to hold and share their views freely. In fact, the concept turns basic human rights norms on their head, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as asserted in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ICCPR, by limiting the right of individuals to share negative or contrarian views of their own or other religions, especially Islam. The concept of defamation of religion has also been used to justify government actions to silence human rights activists and religious minorities. The OIC continues to push for resolutions on this topic in the UN and will probably include the defamation concept in their Charter. Religious defamation is an issue that will continue to be discussed and debated in multilateral human rights fora. The U.S. will need to combat support for the prohibition of "religious defamation" in multilateral fora through public diplomacy outreach and bilateral discussions. END DRL/MLGA COMMENT.

GFOELLER